Some Notes on English as a Lingua Franca

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1 Introduction

English is, beyond doubt, an essential means of communication employed by a continually rising number of linguistically diverse speakers all over the world with ever-increasing uses in business, science, information technology, diplomacy, aviation, seafaring, education, pop-music and the media as well on the level of non-institutionalised communication between individuals.

According to David Crystal (2003:67–69), English has 350 million native speakers, speakers of English as a second language include about 430 million people and the number of speakers of English as a foreign language is estimated around 750 million people. Thus, as calculated by David Crystal, non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers by a ratio of about 3 to 1. However, English is not the most widely spoken language in the world. There are three times as many native speakers of Chinese as English with about 1.026 million people speaking Mandarin Chinese as their mother tongue.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers.)

Spoken by more non-native speakers than native speakers on a daily basis often in settings far removed from native speakers' lingua-cultural norms, English has rightfully become *a lingua franca.* English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) is generally defined as a "contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth 1996:240). In Seidlhofer's view (2001:146) ELF is "an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages". Thus ELF is defined "functionally by its use in intercultural communication rather than formally by its reference to native-speaker norms" (Hülmbauer et al. 2008:27).

Nevertheless, there are also non-native speakers who mainly study English for interactions with native English speakers, usually in the native-speaking countries. English is used as a foreign language in these contexts. Consequently, a distinction must be made between English as a lingua franca and English as a foreign language. One of the primary functions of learning a foreign language is to communicate with native speakers, and learn about their culture. As such, English as a foreign language aims at meeting native speaker norms and gives prominence to native speaker cultural aspects (Breitender 2009:8). In other

words, the native speakers' culture and linguistic norms remain central if a language is studied as a foreign language.

In contrast to EFL, ELF focuses on effective communication with other ELF speakers, i.e. so-called non-natives. Thus, as was pointed out above, ELF interactions concentrate on function rather than form. In other words, communicative efficiency (i.e. getting the message across) is more important than correctness. As a consequence, ELF interactions are very often hybrid. Speakers accommodate each other's cultural backgrounds and may also use code-switching into other languages that they know. The crucial point is that ELF speakers can appropriate it for their own purposes without over-deference to native speakers' norms.

However, it is possible for one person to be in the position of an EFL user at one moment and an ELF user at another, depending on who he or she is speaking to and for what purpose. EFL speakers are not considered "merely learners striving to conform to native speaker norms but primary users of the language where the main consideration is not formal correctness but functional effectiveness" (Hülmbauer et al. 2008:28).

It is, however, vital to point out that ELF cannot be considered as 'bad' or 'deficient' language since "its users are capable of exploiting the forms and functions of the language effectively in any kind of cross-linguistic exchange ranging from the most rudimentary utterances to elaborate arguments" (Hülmbauer et al. 2008:25). Nevertheless, since EFL necessarily carries the culture and language of its speakers, it cannot be viewed as a purely neutral, culture-free means of communication.

As was pointed out above, as ELF is the English which is a property of non-native speakers, native speakers are frequently disadvantaged "due to their lack of practice in this intercultural communication process and over-reliance on English as their mother tongue" (Hülmbauer 2008:27). However, it does not mean that native speakers are excluded from ELF communication although they very often form a minority of the interlocutors. As in ELF interactions, the importance lies on communication strategies other than nativeness; it can lead to communicative situations where those English native speakers who are not familiar with ELF and/or intercultural communication do not know how to use English appropriately.

Since ELF speakers by far outweigh English native speakers, and ELF has special characteristic features of its own, scholars such as Firth (1996), Jenkins (2000, 2002, 2007), Meierkord (2000, 2006), Seidlhofer (2001, 2004, 2005), Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2007), Hülmbauer et al. (2008), Breitender (2009), Pitzl (2009) and Zeiss (2010), etc. recognised the need for a description of the usage of English as a lingua franca at different levels, such as the phonological, pragmatic and lexico-grammatical. This research seeks to establish the characteristic features of ELF which deviate from Standard English, and look for possible 'core' features of ELF.

This paper aims to provide an insight into the nature of English as a lingua franca, a phenomenon which is part of the linguistic repertoire utilized on a daily

basis by a large number of purilingual individuals in Europe and other parts of the world. It touches upon the two most prominent EFL corpora and some recent empirical studies conducted on ELF emerging from the processes of intercultural communication through English, highlighting the phonological and lexico-grammatical properties of ELT with a special focus on idiomatic language use.

2 EFL Corpora

There are two important corpora available for research into EFL: The general Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and the academic Helsinki ELFA corpora (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings).

2.1 VOICE

VOICE, this general EFL corpus, has been compiled at the University of Vienna by Angelika Breitender, Theresa Klimpfinger, Stefan Majewski and Marie-Luise Pitzl under the direction of Barbara Seidlhofer. The following brief outline is provided on the website of the VOICE Project (http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/what_is_voice):

VOICE, the *V*ienna-*O*xford *I*nternational *C*orpus of *E*nglish, is a structured collection of language data, the first computer-readable corpus capturing spoken ELF interactions of this kind.

The corpus currently comprises 1 million words of transcribed spoken ELF from professional, educational and leisure domains.

It is the ultimate aim of the VOICE project to open the way for a *large-scale and in-depth linguistic description* of this most common contemporary use of English by providing a corpus of spoken ELF interactions which is accessible to linguistic researchers all over the world.

VOICE comprises transcripts of *naturally occurring, non-scripted* face-to-face interactions in English as a lingua franca (ELF). The ELF interactions recorded cover a range of different speech events in terms of domain (professional, educational, leisure), function (exchanging information, enacting social relationships), and participant roles and relationships (acquainted vs. unacquainted, symmetrical vs. asymmetrical).

They are classified into the following speech event types: interviews, press conferences, service encounters, seminar discussions, working group discussions, workshop discussions, meetings, panels, question-answer-sessions and conversations.

2.2 ELFA

The project "English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings" (ELFA) at the University of Helsinki falls into two main parts, the ELFA corpus project and the SELF project (http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/project.html.) The ELFA team has also started to compile a database of written academic ELF (WrELFA).

The ELFA corpus was completed in 2008 and its development work is on-going. Altogether, the corpus contains **1 million words** of transcribed spoken academic ELF (approximately 131 hours of recorded speech). The data consists of both recordings and their transcripts. The recordings were made at the University of Tampere, the University of Helsinki, Tampere University of Technology, and Helsinki University of Technology.

The speech events in the corpus include both monologic events, such as lectures and presentations (33% of data), and dialogic/polylogic events, such as seminars, thesis defences, and conference discussions, which have been given an emphasis in the data (67%).

As for the disciplinary domains, the ELFA corpus is composed of social sciences (29% of the recorded data), technology (19%), humanities (17%), natural sciences (13%), medicine (10%), behavioural sciences (7%), and economics and administration (5%).

Project SELF sets out to provide research-based evidence on present-day English as a lingua franca (ELF), with a focus on academic discourses in university settings. Academia has been one of the prime domains to adopt English as its lingua franca, and provides a fruitful context for exploring new developments in English: it is a demanding, verbally oriented and influential domain of language use.

SELF focuses on English-medium university studies, adopting a microanalytic, ethnographically influenced perspective on the social contexts of ELF, tapping the speakers' experience along with their language. As a large-scale sounding board for its linguistic analysis, the research utilises the one-million-word ELFA corpus.

The compilation of the WrELFA corpus (The Corpus of Written English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings) began in 2011, with collection focused on two initial text types: preliminary examiners' statements for PhD theses, and research blogs in which published scientific literature is discussed. As of this update, the total processed text stands at just over 300,000 words, with more texts and text types to be added. As of now, the corpus contains over 100 authors from at least 28 L1 backgrounds.

The processed texts include 81 examiners' statements totalling 92,000 words. The statements have been collected from Finnish faculties of humanities (52% of words), math & science (29%), and medicine (19%). Already 22 L1s are represented in the pool of authors, who are typically professors and well-established researchers in their respective fields.

As for research blogs, they have processed samples of 25 academic bloggers from 13 identified L1 backgrounds for a total of 142,000 words. The academic domains of the blogs favour natural sciences, medicine, technology, and social science. In addition, a sub-corpus of blog discussions from an exceptionally active physics blog has been collected to capture the interactive dimension of academic blogging, with an additional 67,000 words of polylogic text.

The mere existence of these ELF corpora marked the beginning of a new era in ELF research providing invaluable sources for scholars seeking to explore the nature of ELF. They are of great help for researchers searching for patterns, consistencies and systematicities across the communicative spectrum of ELF interactions at different linguistic levels. Many investigations into ELF focus on phonology (e.g. Jenkins 2000, 2002 and 2007), pragmatics (Meierkord 2000, 2006 and Pötzl and Seidlhofer 2006) and lexico-grammatical features (Seidlhofer 2004, 2005 a, b), etc.

3. Phonological properties

As phonology is a relatively closed system, it is not surprising that the first book-length study of characteristics of ELF interactions should be available in this area, namely Jenkins's *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000). Jenkins (2000, 2002 and 2007) investigated which phonological features are fundamental for mutual intelligibility in EFL. She gathered data from interactions among non-native speakers of English in order to establish which aspects of pronunciation cause intelligibility problems when English is spoken as an International Language. This enabled her to draw up a pronunciation core, the Lingua Franca Core, and certain of the features she designates core and non-core provide evidence as to the likely development of ELF pronunciation (Jenkins 2000:123, 2002:96–98).

This Lingua Franca Core does not include some sounds which are regarded and taught as particularly English ones (and also as particularly difficult) such as the '*th* sounds', i.e. the dental fricatives (both voiceless as in *think* and voiced as in *this*) and 'the dark *l*' allophone (as, for example, in the word *hotel*). In the conversations analysed by Jenkins, mastery of these sounds proved not to be crucial for mutual intelligibility, and so various substitutions such as /f, v/ or /s, z/ or /t, d/ for the '*th*-sounds' (dental fricatives) are permissible, and indeed also found in some native speaker varieties. The '*th*-sounds' and 'dark *l*' are designated non-core. The same is true for the following features:

- Vowel quality, e.g. the difference between /bʌs/ and /bʊs/ as long as quality is used consistently;
- Weak forms, i.e. the use of schwa instead of full vowel sounds in words as *to, from, of, was, do*; in EFL the full vowel sounds tend to help rather than hinder intelligibility;
- Other features of connected speech such as assimilation, e.g. the assimilation of the sound /d/ at the end of one word to the sound at the beginning of the next so that /red peɪnt/ ('red paint') becomes /reb peɪnt/;
- Pitch direction for signalling attitude or grammatical meaning;
- The placement of word stress which , in any case, varies considerably in different L1 varieties of English so that there is a need for receptive flexibility;
- Stress timed rhythm.

Jenkins (2000, 2002) argues that divergences in these areas from native speaker's realizations should be regarded as instances of acceptable L2 sociolinguistic variations.

On the other hand, there were features which proved to be decisive for EFL intelligibility and which therefore constitute the phonological Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins 2000:124, 2002:97–98):

- The consonant inventory with the exception of the '*th*-sounds' /θ/ and /ð/ and of the 'dark *l*' allophone /ɬ/;
- Additional phonetic requirements: aspiration of word initial /p/, /t/ and /k/, e.g. in *pin*, which were otherwise frequently heard as their lenis counterparts /b/, /d/ and /g/ and the maintenance of length before lenis consonants, e.g. the longer /æ/ in the word *sad* contrasted with the phonologically shorter one in the word *sat*, or the /iː/ in 'seat' as contrasted with that in 'seed';
- Consonant clusters: no omission in sounds of word initial clusters, e.g. in *proper* and *strap*; omission of sound in word-medial and word-final clusters only permissible according to L1 English rules of syllable structure so that, for example, the word *friendship* can become *frienship* but not *friendip*;
- Vowel sounds: maintenance of the contrast between long and short vowels, such as long and short *i*-sounds in the words *leave* and *live*; L2 regional vowel qualities otherwise intelligible provided they are used consistently, with the exception of the substitutions of the sound /ɜː/ (as in *bird*) especially with /ɑː/ (as in *bard*);
- Production and placement of nuclear (tonic) stress, especially when used contrastively (e.g. *He came by TRAIN*. vs. *He CAME by train*.). The former is a neutral statement of fact, whereas the latter includes an additional meaning such as 'but I'm going home by bus'.

As is evident from the above discussion, being able to pronounce sounds that are often regarded as particularly English but also particularly difficult is not necessary for international intelligibility through ELF. Thus failing to use the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ and 'dark *l*' does not lead to any misunderstandings or communication problems.

4 Lexico-grammar features

This way of thinking has also been applied to EFL lexico-grammar where similar core and non core phenomena have been claimed to exist (Seidlhofer 2004:220 and Seidlhofer 2005a:R92).

The following features of ELF lexico-grammar have been identified:

- Dropping the 3rd person present tense *-s*, as in *he look very sad;*

- Shift in the use of articles (including some preference for zero articles) as in *our countries have signed agreement about this; he is very good person;*
- Failing to use the correct form of question tags as in *you're very busy today, isn't it?*
  (usually *isn't* as a universal question tag, but also others, e.g. *no*?)
- Treating '*who*' and '*which*' as interchangeable relative pronouns, as in *the picture who* or *a person which;*
- Pluralizing nouns that do not have a plural form in Standard English, for example *informations, knowledges, advices;*
- Using the demonstrative *this* with both singular and plural nouns such as *this country* and *this countries;*
- Shift of patterns of preposition use, i.e. adding prepositions to verbs that don't take a preposition in Standard English, for example *we have to study about, discuss about something, phone to somebody;*
- Preference for bare and/or full infinitive over the use of gerunds, as in *I look forward to see you tomorrow;*
- Overusing certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as *do, have, make, put, take,* for example *take an operation, make sport, put attention;*
- Increased explicitness, for example *how long time* instead of *how long, black colour* instead of *black;*
- Replacing infinitive constructions with *that*-clauses, as in *I want that;*
- Exploited redundancy, such as ellipsis of objects/complements of transitive verbs as in *I wanted to go with, you can borrow.*

Most of them are typical learner errors which most English teachers would consider in need of urgent correction and remediation and which consequently often get allotted a lot of time and effort in EFL lessons. Interestingly enough, these non-core lexico-grammatical features of ELF appear to be generally unproblematic and no obstacle to communicative success.

On the other hand, certain other features have been identified as leading to communication problems. These include lexical gaps combined with a lack of paraphrasing skills (Seidlhofer 2001:16) as well as "unilateral idiomaticity" (Seidlhofer 2004:220), i.e. one sided use and understanding of particularly idiomatic constructions. In other words, the use of idioms by a speaker could result in incomprehension on the part of the interlocutor as the idiomatic expressions used by ELF speakers often display considerable non-conformity in reference to native speaker norms. In this view, the use of native speaker idioms does not play an important role in achieving communication success.

However, idioms created by ELF speakers should not be devaluated as errors best avoided. In fact, they can fulfil a striking variety of communication functions in different contexts as more recent research on ELF has shown (e.g. Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2007 and Marie-Luise Pitzl 2009, etc.).

Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2007:365) note that rather than using potentially problematic established idiomatic wordings, lingua franca users tend to handle this aspect of language use "in a flexible way, jointly creating and negotiating idiomatic expressions on-line".

As a novelty, Pitzl (2009) examines idioms and idiomaticity in EFL from a different angle, i.e. by focussing on their metaphorical function. As is noted by Pitzl (2009:317), a central function of idioms in English as a native language (ENL) is to serve as "territorial markers of group membership" whereas ELF speakers may use idioms for various other communicative purposes, such as "providing emphasis, increasing explicitness, elaborating a point, talking about abstract concepts dealing with tricky situations, making a sensitive proposition and adding humour to the interaction". Furthermore, Pitzl argues that while idioms used by ELF speakers may be formally varied in ways possibly considered unacceptable by native speakers, such formal variation of idioms does not inhibit their functionality in ELF. Pitzl (2009:306) assumes that idioms might undergo the process of "re-metaphorization" in ELF whereby metaphoricity is reintroduced into otherwise conventionalized idiomatic expressions. Instead of regarding an idiom as a frozen or dead metaphor one might look at some of "the deliberate uses of metaphors in ELF as formally resembling already existing English (or also other language) metaphors". In Pitzl's view (2009:317) at the formal textual level, deliberate metaphors in ELF arise from three different sources:

- They may be entirely novel with the metaphorical image being created ad hoc by a speaker;
- Metaphors may be formally related to existing English idioms, reintroducing metaphoricity often via formal variation of the expression;
- Metaphors may be created with other language idioms being transplanted into English.

To illustrate the role of metaphors underlying idiomatic expressions, let us consider one of the examples analysed by Pitzl (2009:307–310). In the course of a business meeting between one Austrian and two Korean business partners, the speaker whose first language was German used the following idiomatic expression: *we should not wake up any dogs*, which is reminiscent of an English idiom: *Let sleeping dogs lie*. Although there is a difference in form, the meaning of both is the same: "to avoid interfering in a situation that is currently causing no problems, but may well do so as a consequence of such interference" as given in the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (Speake: 1999:325). What is more, there is also a similar idiom in German: *schlafende Hunde soll man nicht wecken* (literally: sleeping dogs should one not wake). Nevertheless, the expression appears to be created and employed successfully in its context as it does not seem to cause confusion on the part of the Korean interlocutors and it does not result in an indication of non-understanding.

As Pitzl (2009:309) argues, the same metaphorical image is inherent to the English and the German as well as to the ELF speaker's newly created

expression. While this metaphor may be "sleeping or dead" for an L1 speaker when uttering the institutionalized form of the idiom, it seems to be reactivated in ELF. In spite of the formal variation, it is decodable and intelligible. The metaphor functions effectively to make a suggestion which is somewhat tricky and sensitive. By using the metaphor, the ELF speaker hedges his own proposition and conveys the propositional content in an indirect way. Even this one example shows that idioms created by ELF speakers may be formally varied and different from ENL forms but are communicatively purposeful and instead of being an obstacle they contribute to effective communication in ELF interactions.

In order to find out what ELF users' attitudes towards native speaker norms are, Zeiss (2010) conducted a questionnaire survey among university students. Zeiss was particularly interested to find out in how far the theoretically discussed implications of ELT research would correspond with speakers' attitudes toward native speaker norms and perceptions of ELT concerning among others pronunciation, grammar and idiomatic language usage. As Zeiss's findings (Zeiss 2010:88, 94, 101) show, his participants tend to be tolerant with both their interlocutors' non-native accent and their display of grammatically incorrect features – in native speaker terms. However, they tend to be less tolerant with these in their own speech (Zeiss 2010:88, 94). As for idiomatic language use, Zeiss (2010:101) has found that students perceive idioms to be more important in public debate than in private conversation. This finding about idioms could support Seidlhofer's (2006:50) claims which indicate that the use of native speaker idioms does not play an important role in establishing communicative success in international exchange. Although limiting empirical research to a specific population, i.e. students, is not enough to arrive at representative findings, choosing students has various advantages: students are a social group with relatively high mobility and are likely to have contact with ELF due to the increasing importance of academic exchange.

5 Conclusions

Despite being welcomed by some and criticised by others, it cannot be denied that English functions as a global lingua franca. However, as a consequence of its international use, English is being shaped at least as much by its non-native speakers as by its native speakers. As was noted by Seidlhofer (2005b:339), this has led to a "somewhat paradoxical situation": on the one hand, for its vast majority of users, English is a foreign language, and the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any native speakers of the language at all. On the other hand, there is still a tendency for native speakers to be regarded as "custodians" over what is acceptable usage.

The question arises whether the phonological, lexico-grammatical and pragmatic features reported as common in ELF should be regarded as errors or as mere deviations from L1 Standard English on the grounds that they pose few

or no difficulties for communication even while unacceptable in terms of native speaker norms. As was noted by Ferguson (2009:129), ELF is an "emergent, rather fluid phenomenon" in which a whole range of speakers of different backgrounds and levels of proficiency participate. In fact, EFL users draw on a wide range of linguistic features – some standard, some non-standard, others not English at all. In ELF the issue of error is far less salient, what matters more is whether what is conveyed is clear and intelligible to the relevant interlocutors. Thus it might also make sense for English language teaching to move away from its almost exclusive focus on native speaker English and to bring it closer to the real world "by breaking down monolithic, outdated conceptions of what is correct, by forcing acknowledgement that lingua franca users form an important, distinctive constituency of learners, and by suggesting alternative pedagogic goals" (Ferguson 2009:131).

Nevertheless, the compilation of the VOICE and ELFA corpora and the numerous empirical studies on the linguistic description of ELF represent important milestones on the journey of exploring the nature of ELF, which could have far-reaching implications for English language teaching and learning. Furthermore, in the light of the findings of the research on ELF outlined above one can clearly claim that English as a lingua franca is a rewarding and also potentially challenging area for further linguistic research.

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